



Reading Wrong: Misinterpretation and Narrative Deception in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

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Abstract:

This paper looks at how Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* reconfigures the conventions of the clue puzzle by foregrounding the reader's role in producing misinterpretation. The clue puzzle is like a game between the detective and the reader. However, such egalitarian participation is inherently shaped by narrative tactics that give rise to misreading. In *Ackroyd*, Dr Sheppard is an unreliable narrator, but the reader's total reliance on Dr Sheppard leads them to construct a succinct but eventually false interpretation of events. By showing how the clue puzzle elicits a hermeneutic error, the paper argues that Christie changes detective fiction from a genre of neat resolution into a site of interpretive uncertainty, leading to deception and misreading.

The research has been carried out within a theoretical framework that is both qualitative and grounded in reader-response criticism and narratology. In discussing the theoretical basis behind the analysis, through an exploration of reader response theories, primarily those formulated by Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, and including elements of narratology proposed by Wayne C. Booth, the systematic regulation of expectations, hermeneutical processes, and reader trust in the narrator come into view. It is discovered that the misreading of *Ackroyd* is not only purposeful but structural as well. Through the application of Iser's gaps, Fish's interpretive community, and Booth's unreliable narrator, it becomes evident that the reader is complicit in his or her own misdirection.

Keywords: Detective Fiction, Clue puzzle, Reader Response, Fair Play, Misreading.

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Introduction

The Golden Age of Crime Fiction is generally taken to be the period between the two world wars. The “clue puzzle” is a nomenclature used by the critic Stephen Knight for a genre of writing that adhered to certain rules and involved large-scale reader participation. Susan Rowland is of the view that:

Knight describes the clue-puzzle as providing a high degree of reader involvement in an atmosphere of safety. “Clue-puzzle” suggests stories in which the reader is engrossed without ever being fundamentally challenged. Knight also indicates the historical nature of this form. “The term ‘golden age’ stands for a peculiarly blessed era of crime writing. In this chapter, I am going to use ‘golden age’ to denote the major form of crime fiction, 1918–45, yet will include references to later works by a few authors who remained rooted in that style. (Rowland 117).

The clue puzzle was based on the Van Dine Principle of fair play. Van Dine, being the pseudonym of W.H. Wright, was a writer of detective stories. The Detection Club was formed in 1928, and its members swore they would never conceal a vital clue from readers and would always play fair. A list of twenty rules was drawn up, and the writers of detective fiction were to follow them strictly. Hence, the use of devices such as secret passages, undiscovered poisons, and supernatural solutions was ruled out. The clue puzzle was a structured form of detective narrative that playfully included the reader in the discourse. The clue puzzle thus became a game in which all clues were displayed before the reader, and the detective, and the writers tried to test the reader’s detective prowess. fair. Rowland opines:

The clue puzzle thus became a game in which all clues were displayed before the reader and the detective. However, this “reading” proves surprisingly resistant to rational scrutiny. For what is a playful inclusion of the reader, on the one hand, an attempt at frustration, on the other.

Golden Age writers did not really expect readers to solve the crimes ahead of the detective. So, when, partly in fun, the writers' Detection Club under Ronald Knox drew up "Ten Commandments of Detection" in 1928 as "rules" that must be followed to "play fair" with the reader, most of this decalogue was evaded or broken in subsequent years (Horsley, qtd in Rowland 119)

The narrative is thus constructed as a game-like structure, in which meaning is embedded in details that require engaged interpretation. However, as Rowland emphasises, this apparent transparency is not a straightforward guarantee of clarity but a carefully managed illusion of accessibility.

An important feature of the clue-puzzle is its dependence on a carefully controlled narration that directs the distribution and significance of information. Rowland argues that clues are not inherently meaningful; rather, their interpretive value emerges through the narrative contexts in which they are presented (Rowland 118). This means that the clues can appear insignificant or misleading until they are reinterpreted within the final solution and a rereading of the text, which becomes all the more important when we look at the text being studied in this paper. The narrative, therefore, operates through strategies of delay, misdirection, and selective emphasis, which shape how readers perceive and prioritise information. While the clue-puzzle promises that nothing essential is hidden, it simultaneously depends on the reader's inability to interpret what is already visible correctly. This creates a tension between openness and concealment, where accessibility coexists with interpretive difficulty.

Furthermore, Rowland highlights that the clue-puzzle depends on the reader's adherence to certain interpretive conventions, including trust in narrative coherence and the expectation of a singular, unified solution. The form assumes that the process of detection will culminate in the restoration of order, where all clues are retrospectively organised into a coherent explanatory

framework. However, this coherence is achieved only through the detective's authoritative reconstruction of events, which retrospectively assigns meaning to previously ambiguous details. The reader's role, therefore, is not merely to observe but to actively participate in constructing meaning, even as that participation is guided and constrained by the narrative. In this sense, the clue-puzzle operates as both an inclusive and manipulative system, inviting reader engagement while simultaneously directing interpretation in specific ways.

Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative and interpretive approach, relying primarily on close textual analysis. Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* serves as the central text, and particular attention is given to moments in which the narrative voice, the sequencing of events, and the use of red herrings shape the reader's understanding. Rather than treating the text as a fixed source of meaning, the analysis focuses on how meaning emerges through the reader's engagement with it. The study draws on reader-response theory and narratology to examine how interpretation is guided, redirected, and, at times, misled within the narrative. Close textual analysis of key narrative strategies such as gaps, red herrings, and unreliable narration is used to examine how reader expectations are guided and subverted.

Literature Review

The essay considers a series of critical theories that help shed light on the analysis provided here. First, Wolfgang Iser's ideas about gaps and the implied reader explain the reader's active process of interpretation. Secondly, Stanley Fish's theory about interpretive communities explains how a set of reading conventions contributes to interpretation, while Wayne C. Booth discusses the problem of an unreliable narrator in terms of establishing credibility. Finally, the analysis of the clue-puzzle offered by Susan Rowland helps reveal some features of a golden-age detective story. At the same time, the issue of misreading, discussed by Pierre Bayard,

explains how a text can prevent a reader from discovering the truth through various strategies employed by the writer.

Wolfgang Iser and the Production of Misreading

Wolfgang Iser's Reader-Response theory provides an important structure for understanding how meaning in literary texts is not passively received but actively constructed. Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader*, draws on the phenomenological theories of Husserl and Ingarden to distinguish between two dimensions of the literary work: the artistic pole, shaped by the author, and the aesthetic pole, realised by the reader. Reading, therefore, emerges as an engaged and creative process through which the text acquires its dynamic character (Iser 159). In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Iser points out that texts contain some "gaps" or indeterminacies that invite the reader to participate in the production of meaning. Rather than being defects, these gaps are deliberately built into the narrative so that readers may come in to connect incongruent elements, anticipate outcomes, and use their imagination to decipher unwritten implications on the unfolding narrative. The act of reading, therefore, becomes a vigorous process in which the reader continually moves between expectation and reconsideration, gradually forming a seemingly consistent interpretation.

The concept of the "implied reader," as mentioned earlier, is a textual construct by Iser that expresses and defines the role that the actual reader is invited to assume. The text anticipates certain interpretive moves, guiding the reader's responses without fully determining them. This interaction produces what Iser describes as a "wandering viewpoint," in which the reader's perspective shifts as new information becomes available, requiring constant reassessment of earlier assumptions. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Dr Sheppard calls the narrative "kaleidoscopic". Meaning thus emerges not as a fixed property of the text but as the outcome of this ongoing negotiation between textual cues and readerly expectations.

Simultaneously, the very process that enables meaning-making also opens the possibility of misreading. Because readers actively fill gaps using their own assumptions, previous knowledge, and the expectations of the genre of clue puzzle, the coherence they construct may be provisional or even misleading. In genres such as detective fiction, where narrative movement depends on the strategy of withholding and release of information, these gaps can direct the reader toward specific interpretive paths that later prove incorrect. The reader's effort to stabilise meaning, therefore, becomes a site of vulnerability, as the text can exploit these interpretive suppositions that end up producing misinterpretation. Purnima Chakraborty, in her essay *The Secrets of the Narrative* opines:

The detective story is a form that encourages both the detective and the reader to make suppositions....like the detective, the reader has been trying to test the truth of his/her suppositions, interpreting and extending the signs the text provides in an attempt to construct a logical structure and build up a satisfying version of the truth in his/her own mind.(Chakraborty 229)

In the clue-puzzle form, the gaps and the suppositions take on a particularly strategic function. While the genre seemingly follows the principle of "fair play," certifying that all necessary clues are displayed before the reader at the same time, the notion of "fair play" is flouted. The clue puzzle depends on the reader's tendency to organise these clues into a coherent narrative too quickly. The reader is encouraged to analyse clues, fill in missing links to infer causality, and to privilege certain details over others. In this sense, the clue-puzzle does not simply present information; it carefully shapes the conditions under which that information is interpreted.

This notion of "misreading" is especially evident in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The story is set in King's Abbot, an idyllic pastoral village, where Roger Ackroyd, described by Dr

Sheppard as “a country squire” (Christie 17), is murdered. All the residents of his house, Fernley Park, including his stepson Ralph Paton, are suspects. The investigation is led by the eccentric detective Hercule Poirot, and the game begins.

All the clues are displayed before the reader; nothing is hidden, but Christie uses an unreliable narrator and the “red herring technique”, which is called by Pierre Bayard, the “disguise and distraction technique”. The reader “misreads” the clues on an individual level. Bayard calls it “psychic blindness” Bayard is of the view that: “In this respect, Agatha Christie’s work displays the unconscious, not by calling for the decoding of hidden meanings, but by inventing different devices each time that aim to prevent the reader from perceiving the truth.” (Bayard 19). The principle of disguise is to make any identification of the truth impossible. Distraction, on the other hand, can draw attention to other characters who are rendered suspects solely to keep the reader’s interest from settling on one character that matters. Hence, “red herrings” are scattered throughout the narrative: Ralph Paton, the prime suspect; Flora; Charles Kent; Ursula Bourne; Parker; and others. All this is manipulating the reader into “misreading”. Distraction also operates on the tangent of parallel intrigues-the uniting of Ralph Paton with his wife Ursula, Elizabeth Russell with his son Charles Kent. Each of these intrigues produces clues that lead readers to misread. The clues include a wedding ring, a scrap of cambric and a goose quill. These turn out to be superfluous and contribute nothing to the discovery of truth. Bayard holds that truth must be hidden throughout the novel yet remain accessible to readers. Van Dine, in an article published in the September 1928 issue of the *American Magazine*, says: “The truth of the problem must at all times be apparent, provided the reader is shrewd enough to see it. By this I mean that if the reader, after learning the explanation for the crime, reread the book, he would see that the solution had, in a sense, been staring him in the face” (Bayard 21). The reader, however, “misreads” the truth. Misreading also occurs because the chief form of concealment here arises from the confusion of the narrator and the murderer, a murderer so

ostensibly placed before the reader's eyes. The reader seeks the murderer before the "he," when he is really hidden behind the "I" (Bayard 33).

In *Ackroyd*, the gaps identified by Iser not only invite interpretation but also guide it in specific, misleading directions. The reader's active engagement, far from guaranteeing correct understanding, becomes the mechanism through which misreading is produced. The clue-puzzle thus emerges as a form that depends on reader participation while simultaneously exploiting it. What appears to be an open, collaborative process of meaning-making is, in fact, carefully structured towards manipulating an interpretive error.

Stanley Fish and the Structuring of Misreading

While Wolfgang Iser explains how readers actively participate in producing meaning, Stanley Fish transfers the attention to the conditions that shape that participation. In his seminal work *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Stanley Fish essentially reconfigures the question of literary meaning by shifting attention away from the text as an unchanging object and toward the practices through which meaning is produced. Discarding the idea that meaning is located within the text, Fish points out that interpretation is always shaped by the assumptions and strategies that readers bring to their engagement with it (Fish 531). These strategies are not individual but are shared within what he calls "interpretive communities", collective readers who are trained, often unconsciously, to read in particular ways. Meaning, therefore, does not precede interpretation; rather, it emerges through it, shaped by historically and culturally specific modes of reading (531).

One crucial conclusion drawn from this argument is that reading, per se, is neither impartial nor entirely objective. A reader is not an impartial observer; they are part of a system of conventions that determines what can be considered meaningful. What makes sense or appears

logical or possible is based on internalised conventions. Not only do those conventions influence the way readers perceive a certain text, but also what the readers actually perceive about it. In a sense, reading becomes more of a constructive activity rather than a discovery of some sort. A reader reconstructs the text based on preconceived perspectives.

Another development that results from Fish's argument is his notion of the textual authority. As mentioned above, the author argues that it is the interpreters themselves who dictate the bounds of possible interpretation, and not vice versa. Certain interpretations may seem correct compared to others because they accord with established interpretative norms. Thus, meaning is created rather than discovered. Reading creates the illusion of certainty and the stability of meaning. A text does not impose meaning on the reader; a reader needs to construct meaning from the text. In such a way, Fish also opposes the conception of misreading as a mistake, arguing that such a conception is heavily dependent on a certain context.

In detective fiction, the expectations for the interpretation of the text are distinctly constructed. Given their experiences with this genre, readers are likely to believe that clues are presented consistently, that the overall narrative is resolved, and that the outcome of the investigation is the discovery of a single, rational killer. While these preconceived notions help the reader interpret the text, they also limit how flexible that interpretation can be. The reader will most often create a structure based on the order of events, the narrative's overall connection, and a definitive conclusion.

The reader, operating within the conventions of the genre, constructs provisional narratives of guilt, shifting suspicion as new information emerges. These shifts, however, do not destabilise the underlying framework; rather, they reinforce the expectation that one of these figures must ultimately be revealed as the culprit. This is especially important in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where Christie carefully uses these expectations to challenge the reader. The many

suspects, including the “red herrings” like Ralph Paton, Flora Ackroyd, Parker, and Ursula Bourne, do not just serve as plot twists; they also trigger the reader’s interpretive ways. The story invites readers to judge each character based on familiar traits like temperament, motive, opportunity, and suspicious actions. For instance, residents of King’s Abbot believe that Ralph Paton, the prime suspect, could be a womaniser but not the killer because he does not have the temperament. “I cannot help thinking you are mistaken, Inspector”, said Colonel Melrose warmly. I’ve known Ralph Paton from a boy upward. He’d never stoop to murder”(Christie 108). Similarly, Flora Ackroyd, the genteel, bourgeois English girl turning out to be a thief, comes as a surprise to the community of readers. It alters the time of the murder as well. Flora confesses: “M Poirot is right. I took that money. I stole. I am a thief-yes, a common vulgar little thief” (Christie 283).

Fish’s framework shows that this process is not merely encouraged by the text but is structurally predetermined by the interpretive community to which the reader belongs. The reader is not misled despite their interpretive competence but because of it, which gives rise to misreading. The very strategies that enable effective reading within the genre, attention to clues, evaluation of suspects, and anticipation of resolution, become the conditions under which misreading is produced. Even when the narrative presents anomalies, such as minor inconsistencies in Dr Sheppard’s account, these are absorbed into the existing interpretive framework rather than prompting a radical reassessment. However, Christie succeeds in exposing the limits of the interpretative conventions at work. The revelation that Dr Sheppard is the killer not only reveals everything but also shakes up the whole system through which meaning-making has taken place throughout the novel. The possibility that the narrator could be the culprit lies beyond the range of possibilities recognised by the detective fiction interpretative community. This way, it will never really be conceivable except when it becomes revealed. This is where misinterpretation becomes misreading, not through carelessness, but

reading in the wrong context. That is the reason why there was an uproar when the novel came out in 1926. Many readers felt that Christie had flouted the rules of the game. The air was rent with cries of “foul”, “unfair” and “cheat”. The narrator, as a murderer, was beyond the imagination of interpretive communities that read detective fiction.

Wayne C. Booth and the Rhetoric of Narrative Deception

In his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth focuses on the importance of the form of a novel rather than its contents. Booth considers the process of narration a rhetorical technique through which authors seek to provoke specific reactions and opinions in their readers. One of the most important ideas developed by Booth is the concept of an unreliable narrator. While this is a character in a novel who does not provide an objective account of events that happen in the story, the definition of unreliability should not be restricted to intentional lying. A narrator can be quite rational and persuasive; however, s/he can be withholding some details and presenting selected facts in a certain manner. As a result, the reader learns the true meanings only as the novel progresses and becomes aware of inconsistencies in the initial perception of events. Dr Sheppard is this unreliable narrator; he plays the Watson and the Hastings figure to Hercule Poirot and therefore is a trusted figure. As Wayne C. Booth notes, “The narrator may be reliable or unreliable...” (Booth 158), suggesting that narration itself cannot be taken at face value. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, this becomes crucial, as Dr Sheppard’s account appears consistent while subtly shaping the reader’s understanding through omission and framing.

It is essential to emphasise that Booth's approach to fiction pays special attention to the connection between the narrator, the implied author, and the reader. The implied author is the guiding force that controls a story’s text and shapes it so that a person would either support the narrator's position or oppose it. When dealing with an unreliable narrator, this process begins

when the narrator's account initially convinces the reader. Only after some time does the reader become aware of contradictions and inconsistencies that emerge as the story progresses. The whole process is carefully constructed to mislead the reader, who is initially led to accept one specific view of events and then to realise that this viewpoint should be revised.

The same can be said about Dr Sheppard's account in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. His narration seems clear and straightforward enough to comply with the rules of observational realism, which, generally speaking, suggest a high degree of credibility. At the same time, such an impression is created mostly due to the omissions in the narrative, and not the details provided. In other words, critical events, particularly the murder itself, are often mentioned in condensed form. In the latter case, for instance, the narrator uses a Dictaphone to create the illusion of uninterrupted time flow, thereby convincing the reader that the dead man was alive until the very last minute. The narrator tells the truth, but Christie tricks the reader by using “lie by omission”. In the last chapter of the novel, entitled “Apologia”, Sheppard confesses that he told the truth, but there were gaps in his narrative. The passage which recounts his confession reads thus: “ I am rather pleased with myself as a writer...all true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what happened in that blank ten minutes?” (Christie 367)

According to Booth, the concept of rhetorical control of the reader, which means that the narrator actually manipulates them, is important here. The narrator manages to persuade them of the story's veracity. Here, again, the first-person point of view plays an important role: the reader finds themselves on familiar ground, which makes them trust Sheppard and accept their claims without question. Sheppard uses double-edged discourse that seems reliable and precise but offers two different ways of reading. A feature of this discourse is the final conversation between Ackroyd and Sheppard, in which the former reveals the blackmailer to him, much to

his despair. “Suddenly, before my eyes rose a picture of Ralph Paton and Mrs Ferrars side by side. Their heads so close together. I felt a momentary throb of anxiety.” (Christie 58). What is the reason for this anxiety? The reader who does not suspect Dr Sheppard of being the blackmailer, the anguish he refers to may be on account of Ralph Paton being the criminal. However, another possibility may be terrifying him- Mrs Ferrars may have confided in Paton before she died.

Pierre Bayard believes that every sentence of the novel can be read in two different ways, depending on the final solution that the reader decides to accept. There are no lies in Sheppard’s narrative, but neither is there truth. The narrative, mediated through Dr Sheppard, appears to offer a complete and reliable account of events. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that crucial moments are either compressed, deflected, or strategically underreported. One striking instance occurs in Sheppard’s account of the night of Ackroyd’s murder. His narration moves smoothly over key actions, omitting any explicit reference to his own role in the crime. Poirot, however, notices the discrepancy in time that implicates Dr Sheppard: “You will remember that everyone agreed-you yourself included-that it took five minutes to walk from the lodge to the house....But you left the house at ten minutes to nine...and yet it was nine o’clock when you passed through the lodge gates”(Christie 359)

What should be said is that the author demonstrates brilliance in creating an unreliable narrator whose identity cannot be established immediately. On the contrary, unlike in other cases, Sheppard's narration sounds relatively objective and calm, and there is no reason for the reader to suspect anything at the very beginning. It means that the process takes some time and depends on the interaction between the text and its interpreter.

Key Findings

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd radically alters the basic principles of the clue-puzzle by revealing that misinterpretation is a structural aspect inherent in this type of story. Based on Wolfgang Iser's theories, it becomes clear that gaps within the narrative force readers to make sense of the text without sufficient facts, thus creating erroneous interpretations. According to Stanley Fish, interpretive communities rely on genre conventions that shape the reading process and limit readers' freedom to perceive and interpret texts. Wayne C. Booth's theories regarding the unreliable narrator show that Dr Sheppard creates an image of openness while concealing crucial information. All in all, through various theoretical approaches to interpretation, it is possible to see how the author uses readers' misinterpretations to craft a complex narrative. Instead of using the clue-puzzle model, in which rational deduction is a key element in solving crimes, Christie shows that readers' perceptions can lead to erroneous interpretations and reveal their inability to control the reading process and to find the right answer.

Limitations

While the study offers a focused reading of misinterpretation in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, it is limited by its reliance on a specific theoretical framework and a single primary text. The emphasis on reader-response criticism and narratology, particularly the works of Iser, Fish, and Booth, means that other potentially productive approaches, such as historical, psychoanalytic, or ethical readings, remain outside its scope. Additionally, by concentrating exclusively on *Ackroyd*, the paper does not account for how similar strategies might operate across other works of detective fiction or within Christie's broader oeuvre. The argument also assumes a relatively informed reader familiar with the conventions of the clue-puzzle, which may not fully account for varied reading experiences across different audiences. These limitations suggest the need

for further research that expands both the theoretical framework and the range of texts under consideration.

Conclusion

This essay attempted to illustrate how *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* not only adheres to the conventions of the genre it represents but also radically challenges them by making them apparent in its textual structure. The clue-puzzle tradition is built around the principle of transparent narrative, according to which the information necessary to solve a case can be obtained by anyone who reads the text and applies logic properly. Christie's novel proves that such transparency is determined by a reader's ability to make sense of a series of textual clues rather than by their accessibility. Employing insights from theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Wayne C. Booth, the paper has shown that meaning in this work is not uncovered in the course of reading but is actually constructed through the interaction between the narrative and readerly expectations. According to Iser, narrative consists of gaps that readers should fill in. In Fish's terms, these gaps will be filled in according to a set of assumptions concerning narrativity and genre conventions. Following Booth, this construction of coherence must take into account the narrative's unreliability. All in all, reading the book turns out to be a carefully orchestrated journey towards misinterpretation.

At the same time, Christie's novel allows readers to reflect on the process of making meaning from text. The resolution of the mystery involves an assessment of the entire reading experience. It reveals that while clues were there, right from the start, they were understood through assumptions about narrative conventions that had to be challenged and deconstructed. Thus, reading in itself becomes a source of misreading. In other words, the detective genre, traditionally associated with the restoration of order, is transformed into an exploration of the interpretive limits imposed by the conventionality of textual strategies.

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